

# The Surge Toward “Diversity”: Interest Convergence and Performative “Wokeness” in Music Institutions

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## Abstract

Following the brutal murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin in summer 2020, interest in so-called “diversity” initiatives in schools of music across the U.S. and Canada has exploded. In this article, I put forward Derrick Bell’s (1995) principle of interest convergence—a key tenet of critical race theory (CRT)—in order to explore a possible convergence of interests in “diversity work” between white and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) groups in higher education music institutions. I examine music institutions’ performances of “wokeness” at this time and then consider what Sara Ahmed (2012) calls the “non-performative” to interrogate the convergence of white interests with the interests of BIPOC communities. To conclude, I put forward ways to capitalize on this interest convergence through curricular and policy change in higher education music institutions.

## Keywords

Interest convergence, music education, higher education, performativity, wokeness, Sara Ahmed, non-performative

Recently, interest in so-called “diversity” initiatives in schools of music across the U.S. and Canada has exploded. Schools that demonstrated very little interest in diversity and equity<sup>1</sup> previously are forming committees on the topic and releasing statements to students that affirm that Black Lives Matter.<sup>2</sup> Mainstream music conference organizers are actively selecting equity as a conference theme.<sup>3</sup> This surge of diversity work occurred largely in the summer of 2020, following the brutal murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, by police officer Derek Chauvin. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, this murder, after so many others before and since,<sup>4</sup> seemed to be the threshold for the white<sup>5</sup> United States. Suddenly concerned with racial justice, white people sent Ibram X. Kendi’s (2019) book *How to be an Antiracist* and Robin DiAngelo’s (2018) book *White Fragility: Why it’s so Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list in attempts to educate themselves about racism. Schools of music and their leadership in the U.S. and Canada followed suit and took preliminary steps to enact “diversity” work in their institutions. As a longtime member of the diversity committee at the music school where I work, I am relieved to see the surge of interest in matters of race and racism. I am, however, also wary of the motivations behind these moves and the seeming performativity in which music schools appear to be engaged.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, given the momentum toward diversity work that began in summer 2020, I am anxious to see music schools capitalize on this moment and momentum and work toward meaningful change.

In this article, I explore Derrick Bell’s (1995) principle of interest convergence—a key tenet of critical race theory (CRT)—to consider the interests at play in this surge toward diversity work in music schools. I examine the performativity<sup>7</sup> of “wokeness” by music institutions and their leadership and then turn to what Sara Ahmed (2012) calls the “non-performative” in order to examine the convergence of white interests with the interests of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities.<sup>8</sup> In conclusion, I propose ways to capitalize on this interest convergence and enact change in higher education music institutions.<sup>9</sup>

I use the term “wokeness” and “woke” somewhat ironically in this article. Being woke has its roots in Black activism; its first usage was in Erykah Badu’s song “Master Teacher” in 2008 (Pulliam-Moore 2016). Charles Pulliam-Moore writes “Among [B]lack people talking about Ferguson, ‘stay woke’ might mean something like: ‘stay conscious of the apparatus of white supremacy, don’t automatically

accept the official explanations for police violence, keep safe” (n.p.). He traces the term’s usage from its origin in Badu’s song through the time of writing, 2016. In 2012–13, prompted by several events including Trayvon Martin’s murder by George Zimmerman and Zimmerman’s subsequent acquittal, the emergence of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and the imprisonment of feminist punk rock protest band Pussy Riot in Russia, Pulliam-Moore notes that the Twitter hashtag #StayWoke called people to remain vigilant to social issues. Over the last several years, the term woke and the hashtag #StayWoke has been coopted by the “mainstream (read: white) internet” (Pulliam-Moore 2016). While Pulliam-Moore critiques the use of the term to describe issues and circumstances that have nothing to do with awareness of social issues, the usage I am interested in is different. I am specifically concerned with the cooptation and use of the term by white people to describe their own awareness of or “wokeness” to social issues. I am also not necessarily concerned with the use of the term itself, but rather, the *performance* of wokeness by white people and institutions.

### Positioning Myself in Relation to this Work

I want to first interrogate my position in relation to this argument. As a white, Jewish woman living in the U.S., I benefit significantly from white privilege (McIntosh 1989), and I recognize the injustice inherent therein. As a professor in music teacher education, I also match the dominant demographic in predominantly white music schools. I have always “fit” in these spaces, which shapes my experience and what I notice. At the same time, early experiences of gender-based violence taught me intimately about injustice, and I began critiquing the racism and whiteness of music education during my master’s degree studies. I attempted to enact an anti-racist praxis in my public school teaching position, sometimes more successfully than others. In this work, I position myself similarly to Amy Bergerson (2003), a CRT scholar who writes: “Our role [as white people] is to use our experiences as whites to increase awareness of how racist actions, words, policies, and structures damage the lives of our students, friends, and colleagues of color” (59). I would add that it is also the responsibility of white people to take action after increasing awareness. Moreover, as a white scholar, I focus my attention predominantly on issues of whiteness and white supremacy. Racism operates both overtly and covertly in music education (see Bradley 2015 for example), and white music educators must play a role in dismantling it.

## A Note on Performativity

In this paper, I draw on two different meanings of performativity. Initially, I use “performative wokeness” to describe a non-action. Later, drawing on John Austin (1975), Judith Butler (1997, 1999), and Sara Ahmed (2006, 2012), I use the term performative to mean action. Austin (1975) points to the ways that speech acts have agency. They are performative in that they can change the environment. They *do* things. Butler (1999) points to the way that gender is performative. Gender is not a noun or a set of attributes but performative, “constituting the identity it is purported to be” (25). “Gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (25). She further argues: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (25). We thus perform gender in ways that help to create, maintain, and potentially change our identities. “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler 1999, 33). For both Austin and Butler, performative speech effects change. In the context of the arts, Peggy Phelan (1997) wants performative writing to “enact the affective force of the performance event again” (12). Austin, Butler, and Phelan all use the term performative positively and point to the ways that text, speech acts, and the performing arts *act*. In putting forward the nonperformative, Ahmed (2006) confirms their definitions and then defines nonperformative speech acts as those that “hinder rather than enable action” (110).

There is, however, another meaning to the word “performative.” Rather than being seen as an action, in activist circles, performativity is understood as performing in a particular way *without* action. It is thus used in ways that are quite contradictory with how Austin (1975), Butler (1997, 1999), Ahmed (2006, 2012), and Phelan (1997) take it up. In this context, performativity is artificial and fails to *do* anything. The words *performative* and *performativity* thus have two meanings. In the first sense of the word, the subject takes action through speech, or text, or through the repeated stylization of gender (Butler 1999) or other identities. In this context, performativity *does* something. In the other sense of the word, subjects do not take action, but rather position themselves in ways that they believe will help them “look good.” I utilize both meanings of the term in this paper.

## Interest Convergence: A Tenet of Critical Race Theory

For the purposes of this paper, I want to bring forward a tenet of critical race theory (CRT): interest convergence. The tenet of interest convergence emerges from Derrick Bell's (1995) work on the legal case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. In 1954, the justices on the U.S. Supreme Court case ruled that racial segregation in U.S. public schools was unconstitutional. The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision determined that separate facilities were inherently unequal. Their second decision in 1955 ordered states to desegregate their schools "with all deliberate speed" (U.S. Supreme Court 1955, n.p.). This decision, however, predominantly accounted for the interests of white people, who stood to benefit from desegregation both politically and economically at home in the U.S. and abroad in several ways (Bell 1995). First, the Supreme Court justices were aware of the negative conception of the U.S. on the world stage, largely due to ongoing segregation and racism, and saw the end to racial segregation as a way to improve the country's international image. Moreover, in the 1950s, declaring commitment to equal rights during the Cold War strategically cemented the ideal of equality for minoritized groups in the views of people in the Global South, lending credibility to the U.S. struggle with Communist countries at that time (Bell 1995). An anti-segregation stance further had the potential to motivate African Americans to take up a position against the then Soviet Union during the Cold War if that became necessary. Segregation was also seen as a barrier to industrialization of the South, and many white people wished to see a transition to a more industrial South (Bell 1995). The interest convergence principle thus crystallized that white people are only interested in furthering the rights of Black people when it is in their own self-interest (Bell 1995). Hiraldo (2010) affirms that this "tenet acknowledges White individuals as being the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation (Ladson-Billings 1998; DeCuir and Dixson 2004; McCoy 2006)" (56). The courts made the assumption that integration was better than segregation. Love (2019), however, points to Black schools before *Brown* as spaces where Black children and youth could thrive. Integration did not necessarily serve Black interests and, in fact, subjected students who were integrated to violent spaces, in which they no longer had Black teachers and principals. Love (2019) calls this the "educational survival complex" (see 27–34).

Scholars since Bell have added further complexity to the concept of interest convergence. Kenzo Sung (2017) reminds readers that according to Bell, interest convergence has a corollary—"racial sacrifice"—"a term to indicate the

phenomenon of how U.S. courts are generally willing to sacrifice black interests over white interests if they are not aligned” (304). In theorizing interest convergence, it remains important to remember that when interests do not converge, it is the interests of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) groups that are not served. Thus, when the interests of BIPOC groups conflict with the interests of those in power, moving toward equity and racial justice becomes difficult (Leigh 2003). Moreover, the speed at which society can move toward racial equity is dictated by the dominant group. Milner (2008) observes that “convergence and change are often at the moderately slow pace of those in power” (334). He continues: “Change is often *purposefully* and *skillfully* slow and at the will and design of those in power” (334, emphasis in original). When BIPOC groups have to wait for interests to converge with white people to make progress toward racial justice, progress happens at a glacial pace.

Considering interest convergence further requires examining the construct of “interests.” Jackson (2011) groups the multiple interests of white people into categories for consideration. These categories include the material interests (having), emotional interests (feeling), psychological interests (thinking), and moral interests (doing) (439). Delineating interests into categories may allow for a more nuanced look at the interests in question. In this article, for example, I focus primarily on the way that white people may act on their emotional and psychological interests. In considering group interests, it also becomes important to recognize the ways in which group interests are not necessarily monolithic (Guinier 2004) and further account for the distinction between perceived and actual group interests (Sung 2015, 2017). Sung (2017) asserts that “interests are best understood as fluid, intersecting, strategic, and often, contradictory because they are constantly being contextually formed and reformed in response to structural constraints” (306). Understanding interests as deeply contextual is crucial to understanding how groups might maneuver interests to create opportunities for racial progress. Moreover, remembering that interests are complex and not monolithic is essential. In the music education context, drawing on Shannon Sullivan (2014), Vincent Bates (2019) calls on readers to “focus more attention on addressing issues within whiteness—the diverse and intersectional experiences, prejudices, and oppressions that exist between and among Whites” (142). Similarly, interests in different BIPOC groups can also significantly diverge. While it is possible to elide group interests in

order to accomplish a particular agenda—what Gayatri Spivak (1993) calls “strategic essentialism” (3–4)—interests within a specific group may be widely diverse.

Kenzo Sung (2017) also argues that considering interest convergence as *hegemonic interest convergence* may prove useful for analysis. He notes that multiple critical race theorists (and critical legal scholars before them) have drawn on Gramsci to make their arguments and asserts that looking to Gramsci is appropriate (305). Employing Apple (2004), he clarifies that

hegemony is based on the idea that elites maintain hegemonic power largely by getting non-elites to consent to rules because they have been made to believe that these rules serve their interests, through a process of genuine and dynamic compromises within structural constraints that do not allow for a totalizing, nondialectical power. (306)

Sung draws on Edward Taylor (2009) to elaborate his point. Taylor argues that interest convergence is rooted in Marxist theory, wherein “the bourgeoisie will tolerate advances for the proletariat only if these advances benefit the bourgeoisie even more” (5, as cited in Sung 2017, 306). This Marxist idea resonates strongly with interest convergence. Sung (2017) goes on to argue that progress occurs through resistance. Resistance, however, focuses on bringing together a critical mass of individuals with aligned interests to form a new “hegemonic bloc” (306). When interests between the dominant and minoritized groups are not aligned, finding ways to converge these interests may prove useful for accomplishing moves toward racial justice.

Multiple scholars view interest convergence as a strategy for action. If progress occurs when interests align, finding ways to align interests may result in social change. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998) reflects that CRT scholars have argued for a strategy that finds the “place where the interests of Whites and people of color intersect” (12). Taking this approach, however, involves both benefits and drawbacks:

On the one hand, the interest convergence principle exposes the selfishness behind many policies and practices that may advance greater racial equity— this is the bad news interest convergence analyses bring. On the other hand, perhaps some good news lies in the idea that if those of us working for greater social justice can convince those with power that certain policies and practices that bring about greater equity are *also* in their own best interests, then we may have found a promising strategy for social change. (Castagno and Lee 2007, 10, emphasis in original)

Sung (2017) wonders, therefore, if interest convergence might be prescriptive as opposed to merely descriptive. He identifies a vigorous debate among scholars arguing as to whether interest convergence may offer a broader social justice strategy. Ladson-Billings (1998), for example, points to a successful merging of interests that resulted in the recognition of Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) day in Arizona because of an effective boycott (12). Interest convergence may also serve pedagogical goals. Andrew Pierce (2016) notes that white privilege pedagogy, an oft-used approach in social justice classrooms—often fails because it provokes defensiveness and white fragility (DiAngelo 2018). For DiAngelo (2018), white fragility results from some degree of racial stress and manifests as defensive responses that include “emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal from the stress-inducing situation” (2). Pierce proposes:

instead of beginning from a moral imperative to acknowledge, understand, explore, check, dismantle, betray, or exploit one’s white privilege, instructors might aim to identify areas of common interest, ways in which common racist views among whites actually belie their own interests, or ways in which the actual, experienced harms of minority groups represent at least the threat of harm to most white students as well. (515)

He thus offers an *interest convergence pedagogy* that encourages (predominantly) white students to focus on common interests with racialized groups. Whereas white privilege pedagogy often leads to defensiveness, he argues that identifying common interests may mediate some of the defensiveness and allow for a richer conversation. Pierce’s work demonstrates that interest convergence may not only serve as an appropriate strategy for social change but may also be applicable in pedagogical situations.<sup>10</sup>

While such a tactic may ensure that racial progress occurs, it does so with considerable consequences to BIPOC groups. First, interest convergence as a social change strategy guarantees that change will occur at a glacial pace (Milner IV 2008), as noted previously. This approach also centers white interests. Change or progress (or pedagogy, as the case may be) cannot occur until the interests of BIPOC groups align with the dominant white group. Thus, the priorities of BIPOC groups must bend and cater to white interests in order to advance racial justice. This approach leads BIPOC groups to center issues that converge with dominant group interests, which may result in minimal focus on race and racism, as white people often diverge on those issues (Alemán Jr. and Alemán 2010). Moreover,

Hess, Juliet. 2022. The surge toward “diversity”: Interest convergence and performative “wokeness” in music institutions. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 22 (1): 126–55. <https://doi.org/10.22176/act21.2.130>



Alemán and Alemán remind readers that incremental strategies are often not the best approaches for transforming policies and institutions that oppress BIPOC groups. While possibly a strategy for social change, interest convergence is not necessarily in the best interest of BIPOC groups, and thus requires caution.

Drawing on interest convergence as a strategy for social action will be critically examined through examples of common interest in diversity. Next, I will address how “wokeness” can be a form of social capital and, subsequently, building on Ahmed’s notion of non-performativity, I explore how white interest in diversity does not necessarily align with BIPOC interests. Finally, I will offer some suggestions how interest in diversity can go beyond the performative and non-performative.

### “Wokeness” as Social Capital

I employ the lens of interest convergence to consider the present interest that music schools are demonstrating in “diversity.” I use the word “diversity” deliberately because this word is currently pervasive in music school discourse and in higher education (Ahmed 2012), even though I do not believe it is a helpful word in equity work.<sup>11</sup> Music schools are predominantly white spaces.<sup>12</sup> Why, then, this sudden interest in “diversity”? The murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin on May 25, 2020, prompted international outrage that included national protests across the U.S. In a hurry to be on the so-called right side of history, organizations hurried to release statements affirming that Black Lives Matter. One such statement came from the National Association for Music Education (NAfME).<sup>13</sup> White people suddenly seemed eager to engage with racism, and many BIPOC folks<sup>14</sup> challenged this newfound wokeness as performative.<sup>15</sup> White people performing themselves as woke seems to some to be a new way to accrue social capital, which may well lead to economic capital (Lubell 2017). Leveraging wokeness provides some degree of social clout. I further elaborate this point below.

As a form of capital, performing wokeness traverses categories. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) describes cultural, social, and economic capital. While perhaps most obviously a form of social capital, performing wokeness does not align solely with Bourdieu’s definition, but rather bridges multiple forms of capital:

Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-

owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. (248–49)

Performing wokeness or performing oneself as “good” certainly affects one’s network. Being seen as good may widen one’s network of recognition and credential. Part of the capital accrued from performing wokeness undoubtedly is social capital. One interpretation of social capital focuses on the “value of resources accumulated through social relationships as useful capital for people” (Hwang and Kim 2015, 480–81). This idea identifies how the resources forged through performing oneself as woke may be mobilized through resulting relationships. Hwang and Kim (2015) argue that social capital is determined by the number of network connections or relationships one can effectively marshal. Their use of the term is shaped by network theory and emphasizes the importance of making connections. Bourdieu’s use of the term “network” is more substantive and enduring and perhaps involves familial networks as well as other social connections. I draw on both definitions in this article and believe that Hwang and Kim’s (2015) conception of the term suits the purposes of this discussion of performative wokeness.

Social capital is not the only form of capital at play here, however. Bourdieu argues that *cultural* capital exists in three forms:

in the embodied state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc.; and in the institutionalized state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee. (243)

Performing wokeness also aligns with the embodied state as a disposition and perhaps at times may also appear in the objectified or institutionalized state. Importantly, cultural capital leads to social mobility (for example, the cultural capital accrued from education—institutionalized capital—may allow a person to draw on this capital to advance their circumstances). Performing oneself as woke may lead to the kind of social mobility enabled by accruing cultural capital.

Perhaps most insidiously, performing wokeness may also lead to the accumulation of economic capital. The clout gained through performing wokeness may result in economic gains in various ways. Being seen as good may ripple beyond accruing social and cultural capital. Indeed, these forms of capital may be mobilized toward economic gains. How these gains occur is context-dependent but is

also perhaps the most significant form of capital accrued through this performance.

Like individuals, institutions, too, can perform wokeness and engage in virtue signaling.<sup>16</sup> Institutions can engage in these practices through issuing policies about diversity, forming committees to enact these policies, including affirmative action protocols in search committees, etc. In summer 2020, many music schools signaled their commitment to oppose matters of race and racism by issuing affirmations in support of Black Lives Matter and forming or reinvigorating committees on equity and diversity. Christine “Xine” Yao (2018) refers to these types of moves as the “diversity industrial complex” (451). Institutions engaging in these actions may be seen by their communities as woke and supportive of their minoritized populations. Being perceived in this way might allow institutions to accrue social capital by extending their network, their cultural capital by enabling social mobility in the hierarchy of institutions, and their economic capital through the rewards that may come from grants and donors when the institution signals its wokeness.

Sara Ahmed’s (2012) work is instructive in considering the effects of institutions being seen as doing “diversity work.” Ahmed interviewed diversity practitioners in the U.K. and Australia about their experiences of doing diversity work in higher education. While my discussion focuses on the U.S. context, many of the issues and frustrations expressed by these U.K. and Australian diversity practitioners also occur in the U.S. and Canada. Diversity practitioners in these contexts share many of the same challenges explicated in Ahmed’s (2012) book. Ahmed elucidates different ways that doing diversity work in an institution may be performative and suggests that this work can serve as a “branding exercise” (153). Institutions, she asserts, are deeply invested in how they are perceived and collect “perception data” from external communities (34). “Diversity work becomes about generating the ‘right image’ and correcting the wrong one” (34). For example, an institution that the community perceives as predominantly white may be more interested in changing the perception of their whiteness, than the whiteness of the organization (34). In this way, an institution might project an “appearance of valuing” (59) diversity, while actually engaging in what Ahmed calls a “lip service” model of diversity” (58). In this context, “statements like ‘we are diverse’ or ‘we embrace diversity’ might simply be what organizations say because that is what organizations are saying” (57–58).

Ahmed explicitly examines the performative practices of institutions in regard to diversity work.

Diversity thus participates in the creation of an illusion of equality, fitting in with the university's social mission: the idea the university has of itself as doing good ("the great benefactor"). Diversity can allow organizations to retain their good idea of themselves. (71)

In engaging with diversity work, the institution and its leadership then get to understand themselves and be seen as good both by the public (and potential donors) and their own constituents. "Doing well," Ahmed argues, "involves generating the *right kinds of appearance*" (86, emphasis in original). As with perception data, generating the right appearance easily becomes more important than making systemic changes. "Diversity becomes about 'saying the right things'" (59) or performing oneself in a particular way. Moreover, "declaring a commitment to opposing racism could even function as a form of institutional pride: antiracism, as a speech act, might then accumulate value for the organization, *as a sign of its own commitment*" (116, emphasis in original). Being seen to be antiracist may allow the institution to be perceived as "good." Ahmed suggests that diversity might "accumulate commercial as well as affective value" (78).

Diversity has a commercial value and can be used as a way not only of marketing the university but of making the university into a marketplace. Others have called this the "Benetton model" of diversity, in which diversity becomes an aesthetic style or a way of "rebranding" an organization (Lury 2000, 147; Titley and Lentin 2008). (53)

This commercial value translates to economic capital. When the university is perceived as having a commitment to diversity, certain financial possibilities may open up. The affective value likely contributes to social and cultural capital, as being perceived as good (which potentially generates good feeling in the institution) may allow an institution to achieve a high ranking and position it competitively among other institutions, which then further generates economic capital.

I propose that music schools are now acting on diversity issues because interests have converged. It is now seemingly important for white people to be seen as interested in equity, and music schools are no exception to this trend. I argue that the people in the predominantly white spaces of higher music education, as well as the leaders and constituents of said institutions, have a desire to be seen as woke and engage in self-congratulation. Institutions are engaged in "virtue-signaling" and have formulated committees to do so. White people want desperately to be

seen as good, as Applebaum (2010) has noted. Elsewhere, I have written about what I called “the politics of self-congratulation” in relation to engagement with world music. At the time, I defined self-congratulation as “the knowing of oneself through the assumption of the inferiority of the Other and the applauding of oneself for being a ‘culturally “tolerant” cosmopolitan” white subject (Hess 2013, 71–72). I used scare quotes around the term “tolerant” to indicate that tolerance, which implies putting up with something undesirable, is hardly a quality to aspire to, and yet, seems to be exactly the quality desired. Nine years after that piece was published, white people are currently engaging in the politics of self-congratulation, now for performing themselves as woke to racial justice issues. To return to the question of music schools engaging with diversity issues, music schools that engage with racial justice can perform themselves as equitable spaces, which again benefits the white people who direct these institutions.

White people want to be perceived as good (Applebaum 2010), and this desire impacts how predominantly white institutions (PWIs) wish to be perceived (Ahmed 2012). White people engage in a “race to innocence”—an avoidance of any complicity in the oppression of minoritized groups (Razack 1998). Fearful of being perceived as racist (Watson and Thompson 2015), being seen as good becomes more important than engaging in the harder work of systemic change. Moreover, the capital gained from reflecting a positive image in relation to race and diversity ripples across social, cultural, and perhaps most significantly, economic capital. Projecting the “*right kinds of appearance*” (Ahmed 2012, 86, emphasis in original) results in gains for white people and for PWIs. Being seen as good or woke results in social, cultural, and economic capital. In this political moment, then, interests have converged. BIPOC groups are interested in advancing racial justice in a substantive way, while white people are interested in being seen to be committed to advancing racial justice. Importantly, this interest convergence is not a full convergence. Being seen to be committed is not the same as being committed. I am interested, however, in how wanting to be seen to be committed may ultimately result in substantive change.

### What Wokeness Does (or Doesn't Do)

I argue that there is also an insidious interest convergence at play in the performance of diversity work. Significantly, Ahmed (2012) contrasts the performative speech act to what she calls the non-performative. Here, she draws on John

Austin's (1975) famous work *How to Do Things with Words*. Austin distinguishes between utterances that report on something (descriptive or constative utterances) and utterances that do something (performative utterances). Performative utterances perform an action. They do what they say. In contrast, Ahmed proposes the “non-performative”—discourse which does not produce the effect it names. “In the world of the non-performative, to name is not to bring into effect” (117). Ahmed argues:

In my model of the non-performative, the failure of the speech act to do what it says is not a failure of intent or even circumstance, *but is actually what the speech act is doing*. Such speech acts are taken up *as if* they are performatives (as if they have brought about the effects they name), such that the names come to stand in for the effects. As a result, naming can be a way of not bringing something into effect. (117, emphasis in original)

Doing diversity, Ahmed proposes, can be a way of not doing diversity. She cautions:

The ease or easiness in which diversity becomes description shows how diversity can be a way of not doing anything: if we take saying diversity *as if* it is doing diversity, then saying diversity can be a way of not doing diversity. (121)

Simply “saying diversity” is not a performative; it does not produce the effect it names.

Ahmed's (2012) book develops the concept of the non-performative from her earlier work on “declarations of whiteness” (Ahmed 2004) and the “nonperformativity of antiracism” (Ahmed 2006). Like the 2012 book, the 2004 and 2006 articles draw upon Austin to point to the way that particular declarations of whiteness such as “I/we must be seen to be white” and “I am/we are racist”<sup>17</sup> function as non-performatives; these declarations are ways of failing to act on racism. The 2006 piece extends this work and characterizes these declarations into four specific kinds of institutional speech acts: admissions, commitments, performances, and descriptions. Her 2012 book further extends the argument specifically about institutions and non-performativity.

Ahmed's argument about non-performatives is complex and describes the ways that doing diversity actually allows the maintenance of the status quo. “Having an institutional aim to make diversity a goal can even be a sign that diversity is not an institutional goal” (23). “Succeeding” at equality may simply allow organizations to “keep doing what they are doing” (105). Yao (2018) affirms: “The diversity industrial complex in higher education creates openings we can leverage toward antiracist ends, but can co-opt these terms and our work toward

maintaining the public face of the institution without engaging in real change” (451). Doing diversity becomes a way of avoiding change.

The word “diversity” itself may be part of the problem. Somewhat of an empty signifier, diversity lacks the directness of words like “equity” and “anti-racism.” Ahmed (2012) asserts:

Diversity appeals are often made because diversity seems appealing: it is more consistent with a collaborative style. If the word “diversity” is understood as less confronting, then using the language of diversity can be a way of avoiding confrontation. Diversity is more easily incorporated by the institution than other words such as “equality,” which seem to evoke some sort of politics of critique or complaint about institutions and those who are already employed by them. Diversity becomes identified as a more inclusive language *because* it does not have a necessary relation to changing organizational values. (65, emphasis in original)

The neutrality of diversity and its detachment from power and inequality makes it difficult for diversity to effect change (Ahmed 2012, 66).

Moreover, the use of the word diversity may also facilitate the concealment of systemic inequalities and racism (Ahmed 2012). Significantly, there is a performative element to this non-performative:

Diversity becomes a form of image management: diversity work creates a new image of the organization as being diverse. It might be image management—or perception management—that allows an organization to be judged as “good at equality.” Just as changing the perception of an organization from being white to diverse can be a way of reproducing whiteness, so, too, being judged as good at equality can be a way of reproducing inequalities. (Ahmed 2012, 102)

When institutions engage in virtue signaling in relation to diversity, that signaling may reproduce whiteness and inequalities. A commitment to anti-racism may in fact prevent the recognition of racism within institutions (Ahmed 2012, 115).

“Doing diversity” may involve creating policies and forming committees, as many higher education institutions in music education have recently shown. Ahmed worries that “while doing the document is doing something, it is also a way of not doing something: you do the document rather than ‘doing the doing,’ where this other sense of doing would require doing something more than the document” (86). When policies are seen to be doing something unto themselves, these policies may allow institutions to understand themselves as having “done diversity”—having succeeded at equality. Policies themselves, then, may block those in institutions from recognizing the work there is to do. Ahmed writes:

The more a document circulates, we might assume, the more it will do. But the circulation of the document can become *what it is doing*. Diversity work becomes moving documents around. If the movement becomes the action, or even the aim, then moving the document might be what stops us from seeing what documents are not doing. If the success of the document is presumed to reside in how much it is passed around, this success might “work” by concealing the failure of that document to do anything. (97)

While institutions often deem policies as a place to begin, institutional change requires further action. When that action fails to occur, documents themselves make little difference. Importantly, “the document becomes not only a form of compliance but of concealment, a way of presenting the university as being ‘good at this’ despite not being ‘good at this’ in ways that are apparent if you look around” (102). A strong diversity policy may allow those in institutions to feel successful in their diversity efforts. Committees too, may uphold the status quo:

When the equality committee becomes a routine, it can provide a means of avoiding action as well as difficulties. To avoid a trap can be to avoid the situations in which you might be required to amend what is being done. Institutions can “do committees” as a way of *not* being committed, of not following through. (Ahmed 2012, 124)

When the university engages in diversity as a way of not doing diversity, the institution upholds the status quo. The virtue signaling that leads to being seen to be good at equity is a “lip service’ model of diversity” (Ahmed 2012, 58). In turning again to interest convergence, interests have aligned, but in troubling ways. BIPOC groups have been pushing toward racial justice in higher education institutions. These institutions, including schools of music, have presented themselves as woke to issues of racial justice and have enacted policies and struck committees to work on this issue. Ahmed’s (2012) concept of non-performativity, however, may enable institutional leaders to recognize how this performance of wokeness or of diversity actually maintains the status quo. When doing diversity is a way of not doing diversity, the interests of white people are served because maintaining the status quo allows white people to maintain our power and privilege. PWIs and the people within them then can perform themselves as good while failing to cede any power or create institutional change.

In 2016, an opportunity for meaningful change presented itself in the field of music education. Michael Butera, the Executive Director of NAFME, made explicitly racist remarks at a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) meeting on diversity, equity, and inclusion when he was challenged about his all-white board of



directors (see Cooper 2016; McCord 2016 for a description of the incident). He then abruptly left the room, abandoning music education's seat at the NEA meeting on equity and diversity. Butera resigned and was replaced within a week by another white man—Mike Blakeslee. This moment in music education history could have been a watershed moment. Many individuals and groups in music education demonstrated outrage and called for change. Since that time, NAFME has claimed to center issues of equity and diversity, has created plans for implementation of these values,<sup>18</sup> and commissioned Cook Ross—an organization that partners “with the world’s most influential organizations to create inclusive leadership and cultures”<sup>19</sup>—to conduct a study on equity issues within the organization.<sup>20</sup> More recently, the organization has made some potentially more substantive moves toward equity. In April 2022, NAFME asked its membership to vote on bylaw amendments<sup>21</sup> that would make the NAFME Equity Committee a Standing Committee of the Association instead of an ad hoc committee and to add two Equity Committee appointments to the NEB. The results of the vote affirmed these bylaw amendments and appointments. While these steps could lead to meaningful change, only time will tell if these efforts, which until April 2022 have remained non-performative, will provoke significant change in the organization. Given the role, visibility, and mission of NAFME, if change occurs within the organization, it will likely have a ripple effect, as the organization sets the tone for the affiliated state and collegiate organizations.

### Capitalizing on the Moment

I want to return now to the idea of interest convergence as a strategy for action. While waiting for moments when the interests of white and BIPOC groups align to advance racial justice is an injustice in itself that caters to white interests, this collective interest in diversity initiatives prompted by the events of summer 2020 makes it feel as though change might be possible.<sup>22</sup> BIPOC groups call for racial justice and white people, including those in predominantly white schools of music, are interested in being seen to be concerned about these matters. While doing diversity work may indeed serve as a non-performative—a way of not doing diversity work—this alignment of interests has the potential to become enough to motivate and effect meaningful change.

As someone who has served on my College's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) committee for seven years, I am ecstatic that the school is

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suddenly interested in these matters and anxious to seize the moment to change both school climate and policies. It may be possible through action to make whether or not these moves are performative beside the point. As I wrote years ago, “the politics of self-congratulation ultimately act as a smokescreen for what truly matters—the question of how to effect change over material relations” (Hess 2013, 81). For right or wrong reasons, the events of summer 2020 appeared to prompt a moment of change. Although I am deeply suspicious that the sudden movement serves the interests of white constituents, I nonetheless want to capitalize on the moment to affect change of material relations. I am less concerned about the “performative wokeness” that ensues, if the changes made actually create more just spaces for BIPOC groups. To do that, however, it is imperative to move far beyond conversations about recruitment and demographics and to look critically at music school spaces, which are often violent places for BIPOC communities (Thomas-Durrell 2022), and enact crucial changes. Doing this anti-racist work means taking a hard look at institutions and people in them and moving to material action.

I propose that predominantly white music schools that engage in virtue signaling of their interests in racial justice would do well to consider enacting multiple changes at the curricular and policy level—the material changes that become necessary to making a meaningful difference. Implementing such changes further requires effectively convincing the majority of stakeholders of the need for change and prioritizing the needed work financially. For solid and/or suspect reasons, interests have converged, and institutions have an opportunity to shape curriculum, policy, and budgets to match the wokeness they are performing.

In terms of curriculum, music schools can consider ways to widen the musical practices studied at the institution. Presently, most music schools center Western classical music. Expanding this curriculum to include multiple musics produces other effects, including the hiring of individuals who can teach these musics, changing what ensembles are offered, honoring aural and oral tradition, and more. Professors can then approach the inclusion of multiple musics as integrative rather than additive (Hess 2015). Rather than an “add-and-stir” approach to incorporating multiple musics (Morton 2003), a just approach to including a range of musics involves ensuring that professors and administration communicate their value. Pedagogues delivering curriculum in music schools can also actively interrogate how Western classical music came to be at the center of the curriculum. Such interrogation may lead to important questions about power, colonialism, and

material relations. Challenging the centrality of classical music may also allow other possibilities for curriculum to emerge. Once institutions have incorporated multiple musics, an important next step would include expanding theory and history offerings to reflect multiple histories and multiple theories, alongside aural and written traditions. Music history and music theory have long centered the Western canon, but, as Philip Ewell (2020) points out, theory (and history, I would argue) operates from a “white racial frame.” Expanding the racial frame of music theory and history thus also makes a key contribution to systemic change in music schools. Institutions can also expand the types of ensembles offered and change ensemble requirements to open possibilities for students to engage with different musics. Ensembles such as Ghanaian drumming ensembles or Balinese Gamelan center entirely different principles than Western classical ensembles. Students experiencing these musics have the opportunity to engage in diverse musical epistemologies (Hess 2018). Changing ensemble requirements also involves centering popular music practices and offering opportunities to students to engage in musics for which they have an affinity. Finally, institutions can also address the racist repertoire that still pervades musical choices today. Songs rooted in blackface minstrelsy, for example, should no longer have a place in repertoire.<sup>23</sup> These suggestions provide a mere beginning to curriculum reform in music schools.

From a policy perspective, music schools need to address their audition practices. As Julia Koza (2008) described many years ago, auditions involve “listening for whiteness.” Koza, however, encouraged people conducting auditions to continue to listen for whiteness in order to defund it. As a gatekeeping exercise, auditions often successfully maintain the status quo of white, middle-class students. Changing audition practices involves thinking through what it might mean for prospective students to have more choice about the genres with which they audition and widening audition expectations to embrace the multiplicity of musics students bring to the process. Institutional change also requires addressing hiring practices. To facilitate the teaching of multiple musics, schools of music require people who have expertise in these musics. Hiring these individuals at adjunct status, however, as institutions typically do, sends a clear message about the hierarchy of musics in the institutions. These hires must have the same privileges and job security as tenure track faculty with opportunities for advancement. This type of hiring may also require reconsidering degree requirements, as a master tabla player, for example, would not be able to acquire a DMA or a master’s in tabla given the classical focus

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of the current system. Changing hiring practices also entails making meaningful efforts to place BIPOC faculty in permanent positions in schools of music—not siloed in areas like jazz<sup>24</sup> but integrated across all areas of the expanded curriculum envisioned above. The fact that many BIPOC students and faculty experience schools of music in PWIs to be violent spaces also requires addressing climate issues. Implementing mandatory education about whiteness, white supremacy, equity, racial bias, and microaggressions then becomes part of the path forward. If predominantly white music schools want to signal that they are woke, they need to do the work to become woke. Lastly, implementing such curricular and policy changes require changes to the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) accreditation process. Revisiting and revising NASM requirements is essential to moving forward.

## Conclusion

I have yet to see evidence that any of the virtue signaling going on currently will result in action, but I am hopeful that at a time when institutions and their leaders seem eager to perform themselves as woke, that individuals interested in racial justice in schools of music might be able to implement meaningful change. Effecting change requires pushing beyond the stubborn non-performativity embedded in current practices of diversity in higher education. Importantly, Ahmed (2012) asserts:

The sentence [from the qualitative interview] “commitments can’t come without other actions” is instructive. It suggests that commitment is an action, but one that does not act on its own but depends on other actions: we might call these “follow-up” actions. For a commitment to do something, you must do something “with it.” (120)

To avoid diversity work becoming a non-performative, by which doing diversity work is a way of not doing diversity work, institutions must follow up their purported commitments with action.

In terms of interest convergence, Milner (2008) suggests that the second facet of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s approach to a non-violent campaign—negotiation—aligns with Bell’s (1995) concept of interest convergence. When interests are negotiated, he asserts, moving forward becomes possible.

As is the case in teacher education, those in power sometimes “speak,” theorize, and philosophize about being committed to combating oppression, suppression,

and marginalization yet sometimes do not follow through with their actions in their policies and practices. As a result, it will be difficult for those of us in teacher education to truly advance the field unless someone—some group, system, or institution—is willing to negotiate and give up some interest to benefit the “other.” In this sense, giving up something and the gaining of something by the other result in benefits and gains of the masses (Hilliard 1992); both the oppressor and the oppressed gain. (Milner 2008, 342)

Milner points here to the performativity that sometimes occurs without the necessary actions to follow-up. He urges teacher educators to use interest convergence as a tactic—to find where the interests align and capitalize on it. In order to negotiate interests, however, dominant groups must come to the table in good faith and be prepared to “give up something.” That “something” includes interrupting the whiteness of music schools, as well as providing budget allocations for meaningful change. If PWIs and their leadership wish to be seen as truly woke, they must follow up with action. Moreover, the action needs to be substantive. Alemán, Jr. and Alemán (2010) argue that incremental strategies for change are not the only path to change, nor are they typically the best path to transforming oppressive institutions and policies.

In the aftermath of the events of summer 2020, interests have converged, and while motivations may be suspect, predominantly white music schools have the opportunity to put action behind their performativity. Diversity work need not remain a non-performative—a way of not doing the work institutions say they do. Instead of institutions virtue-signaling commitment, people within these institutions and the communities they serve can call for accountability. Here, I mean the accountability called for by activist communities rather than an accountability produced by audit culture, in which university “personnel can become good at audit by producing auditable documents, which would mean the universities that did well on race equality would be simply the ones that were good at creating auditable systems” (Ahmed 2006, 116). Audit culture accountability likely produces further non-performatives. Instead, accountability, following Ahmed (2012), means that institutions enact their commitment, rather than merely stating it. Signaling commitment is no longer sufficient. Predominantly white music schools have been and continue to be violent spaces for BIPOC students and colleagues. Changing that situation is crucial to how the field moves forward.

In summer 2020, many U.S. music schools issued statements affirming that Black Lives Matter following the brutal murder of George Floyd. Yet Black lives

must matter within music institutions as well as outside them. If music schools wish to be anti-racist, they must enact the change their policies and committees describe. Being seen as woke comes with particular responsibilities. Importantly, when it comes to racial allyship, allies do not get to decide they are woke. They also do not get to decide they are allies or co-conspirators (see Love 2019)—this decision can only be made by BIPOC groups. If an institution engages in virtue signaling about their commitment to racial justice, it is their BIPOC community members who get to determine if they are living up to their mythology. If these community members find the institutions wanting, institutions must double down on their commitment and align their actions with their words. It is past time for music schools to live up to their mythology. Anything else is simply a non-performative.

### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for helping me to strengthen this paper. I would also like to thank Barbara Applebaum, who read the paper for me in its initial form and provided feedback.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Diversity” is the term most frequently used to describe this type of work (Ahmed 2012). I prefer the term “equity,” as it better encompasses the need for

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substantive change. Whereas diversity is often viewed as a problem, equity speaks to a purposive leveling of the playing field to address the inequities minoritized groups face. Moreover, Ahmed (2006) cites Deem and Ozga (1997) who suggest that “the concepts of equity and equal opportunities imply an underlying concept of social justice for all,” while “the notion of diversity invokes the existence of difference and variety without any necessary commitment to action or redistributive justice” (33, as cited in Ahmed 2006, 120). See also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gytXe9YTyR8>, which discusses the difficulty of some of the words we use to talk about issues of race and racism.

<sup>2</sup> I capitalize Black Lives Matter to point to the movement (<https://blacklivesmatter.com>).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the College Music Society Conference in Fall 2020 entitled “Fostering Equity and Opportunity in Music” ([https://www.music.org/index.php?option=com\\_eventbooking&view=event&id=90&Itemid=3524](https://www.music.org/index.php?option=com_eventbooking&view=event&id=90&Itemid=3524)).

<sup>4</sup> See <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org>.

<sup>5</sup> Following Price, I defy convention and use a lowercase “w” for white in this paper while capitalizing Black. “If you consider the capital letter to be a conferral of dignity, you may balk at the symmetry. ‘We strongly believe that leaving white in lowercase represents a righting of a long-standing wrong and a demand for dignity and racial equity,’ Price, of the Insight Center, wrote. Until the wrongs against black people have been righted, she continued, ‘we cannot embrace equal treatment in our language.’ The capital letter, in her view, amounts to cultural capital—a benefit that white people should be awarded only after white supremacy has been rolled back” (Appiah 2020).

<sup>6</sup> I am generalizing my argument to music schools, not because I believe that all music schools are acting performatively or non-performatively, but because, at this time, there is a degree of complicity for predominantly white institutions (PWIs) regardless of motivations. The claim that this argument does not stand for all music schools is similar to the argument that the problem of racism does not reside in *all* white people. This argument is akin to the #notallmen hashtag during the #MeToo movement claiming that some men were “good” and not part of the “problem.” Making such claims (“not all music schools,” “not all white people,” “not all men”) avoids accepting responsibility for oppression. I thus generalize because it is important for music schools to accept responsibility for racism.

<sup>7</sup> I discuss the meaning of this term before exploring the phenomenon of performative wokeness and the non-performative.

<sup>8</sup> BIPOC stands for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color and is meant to point to the distinct oppressions that different racialized groups face, rather than

eliding all racialized groups under the umbrella term “people of color.” The term is not without its controversies. Eliding multiple racial groups together can also be seen as an erasure (Garcia 2020). In music education, Lorelei Batisla-ong coined the acronym BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous, Asian) to further differentiate different racial groups. See

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMrlgoYmLUo> for a conversation between Lorelei Batisla-ong and Alice Tsui about this term. While the discussion thus far has focused on Black and White interests, considering the differential interests of different racialized groups is important.

<sup>9</sup> Higher education music institutions could include music schools, conservatories, music departments housed in arts or humanities schools, and other spaces in which it is possible to study music at the postsecondary level. I predominantly focus on institutions that center Western classical music.

<sup>10</sup> In conceptualizing the pedagogical, I consider classrooms, but also instances of public pedagogy.

<sup>11</sup> See endnote 1 for an explanation and a YouTube video link to a discussion the difficulty of some of the words often used to talk about issues of race and racism.

<sup>12</sup> Brent Talbot and Roger Mantie (2015) describe the overwhelmingly Western European practices in music schools that facilitate the whiteness of these spaces.

<sup>13</sup> See <https://nafme.org/what-we-believe-black-lives-matter/>

<sup>14</sup> Folx is a gender neutral term that deliberately includes the LGBTQ population and people who do not identify with the gender binary.

<sup>15</sup> See for example <https://www.adolescent.net/a/the-rise-of-performative-wokeness->.

<sup>16</sup> Ahmed (2006) points to the ways that institutions are constituted as individuals in “diversity” work. She writes: “In a way, the institution becomes recognized as racist only through being posited as an individual, as someone who suffers from prejudice but who could be treated so that they would act better toward racialized others” (107).

<sup>17</sup> Ahmed (2006) writes the following about this particular statement: “The paradoxes of admitting to one's own racism are clear: saying ‘we are racist’ becomes a claim to have overcome the conditions (unseen racism) that require the speech act in the first place. The logic is, first, we say, ‘we are racist,’ and insofar as we can admit to being racist (and racists are unwitting), then we show that ‘we are not racist,’ or at least that we are not racist in the same way. What is important here is that the admission converts swiftly into a declarative mode: the speech

Hess, Juliet. 2022. The surge toward “diversity”: Interest convergence and performative “wokeness” in music institutions. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 22 (1): 126–55. <https://doi.org/10.22176/act21.2.130>

act, in its performance, is taken up as having shown that the institution has overcome what it is that the speech act admits to. Simply put, admissions of racism become readable as declarations of commitment to antiracism” (107–108).

<sup>18</sup> See their position statement on equity and access here:

<https://nafme.org/about/position-statements/equity-access/>. See their position statement on inclusivity and diversity here: <https://nafme.org/about/position-statements/inclusivity-diversity/>. Both statements are buried on the website.

<sup>19</sup> The Cook Ross website address: <https://cookross.com>.

<sup>20</sup> The Executive Summary of this study is available at: [https://nafme.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/NAfME\\_DEIA\\_Executive-Summary\\_2019.pdf](https://nafme.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/NAfME_DEIA_Executive-Summary_2019.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> See <https://nafme.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/NAfME-2020-Constitution-and-Bylaws-DRAFT-amendment-REDLINE.pdf> for the draft bylaw amendments.

<sup>22</sup> I note here that I wrote this article originally in 2020 and I intended it to respond to the outpouring of interest in diversity initiatives that followed the events of summer 2020. The U.S. has since faced significant backlash against critical race theory (CRT). Listen to the podcast *Southlake* for examples of this backlash: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/southlake/id1582213644>.

<sup>23</sup> I am not suggesting we should erase the very problematic history of minstrel songs. I am suggesting that performing them causes harm to Black students and professors. White people must grapple with this legacy of harm and this can occur through studying these materials as cultural artifacts, in ways that do not further perpetuate harm.

<sup>24</sup> I point explicitly to jazz here not because I believe that jazz faculty lack potential for influence, but because of the way that jazz can often affect the overall demographics of the school. At my institution, for example, the jazz faculty are predominantly BIPOC individuals, which impacts the demographics of our overall faculty. While we have significant BIPOC representation on faculty because of jazz studies, we nonetheless have an entirely white music education, musicology, and music theory faculty (at time of writing). The way our overall demographics appear, in other words, is not truly representative of the whiteness of our institution.